

**ArtSeen**

# Katherine Bradford: *Philosophers' Clambake*

By **Jared Quinton**

*Philosophers' Clambake* brings together 14 paintings by Katherine Bradford, all made over the past 12 years. The title is borrowed from one of the smallest, strangest, and darkest works in the exhibition. A bit of a departure for an artist now better known for large-scale faux-naïf figures rendered in a dreamy fluorescent palette, this moody, almost nocturne-like composition from 2010 shows a group of tiny black-clad men clustered in the foreground. Behind them, a wild bonfire rages, its flames escaping upward out of the picture. Our sense of time and place is provided by the layered blue-black ground, whose subtle tonal shift suggests a horizon line against the night sky. The title casts a sense of wry humor over a scene that might otherwise read as macabre or even cultish.

All of the works in this show have been collected by the Hall Art Foundation over the past decade, and they are installed in a renovated farm building on the foundation's property in Reading, Vermont. The Halls' penchant for collecting artists in depth—while not without its financial incentives—makes exhibitions like this possible. In just a handful of works we see both the remarkable evolution of Bradford's practice in a short period of time and her consistency of theme and material approach. A visitor first encounters a cluster of small works from 2009 in which tiny human figures, rendered in just a few strokes of oil, are subsumed by vast expanses of water. Three paintings from seven years later have similar subjects rendered with acrylic and on a larger-than-life scale, as in the particularly humorous and ominous *Large Ocean Painting* (2016). Here, alligators and people float together in a mottled purple sea—the swimmers and the watery ground have equal weight, and the palette has become more vibrant, less of this world. In the works created since 2018, Bradford's figures take over compositional primacy, thanks mainly to the adoption of strong black outlines, while the grounds dissolve into a washy, gently hued ether.

ON VIEW

Hall Art Foundation

*Philosophers' Clambake*

May 15 – November 28, 2021

Reading, VT



Katherine Bradford, *Moon Jumper*, 2016. Acrylic on canvas, 72 x 60 inches. Hall Collection. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Katherine Bradford.

The organic evolution of Bradford's treatment of the figure mirrors the approach she takes in making each painting. A proudly self-taught artist, Bradford is open about the fact that intuition guides her practice. While rich with emotional and other affective associations, her human figures are first and foremost composition elements which the artist repeatedly rearranges until their relationships with each other, the canvas edges, and the painterly ground are where she wants them. (This is not to say she seeks anything like balance or equilibrium, however.) Bradford's penchant for working and reworking is evident in the surfaces of her pictures, whose luminescent color fields are developed through repeated applications of paint followed by deliberate sessions of scraping and scumbling, even the use of dry brushes to infuse the paint more deeply into the canvas. The tension between this intensive process and the exuberant off-handedness of her figural style lends an enchanting quality to Bradford's work—a feeling of vibrating instability and aliveness to the world.

The exhibition's strongest moment is perhaps the pairing of two paintings—one pink, one purple, both over six feet tall—that hang opposite each other in one corner of the Hall's space. In *Moon Jumper* (2016), a luminous moon and a barely scratched-in orange figure hover over and against a gradient of royal purples, which create an ambiguous sense of space and perspective for the viewer: are we observing from the Earth? The atmosphere? Outer space? The play between scumbly surface and raking perspective can't help but call to mind Milton Avery, while the palette and subject are more Georgia O'Keeffe. *Fear of Shoes* (2018), meanwhile, contrasts this sense of timeless fantasy with a distinctly contemporary feeling of alienation that's more akin to the work of Nicole Eisenman or Miriam Cahn. In a domestic setting framed by disembodied legs clad in green pants and pink shoes, Bradford has blocked in a female figure with shades of salmon. Wearing just her underwear and sporting a head of green hair, she gazes outward past the viewer with tired, yellowed eyes—the only feature on her face—and exudes a sense of humble, though not humiliated, resignation.



Katherine Bradford, *Fear of Shoes*, 2018. Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 68 inches. Hall Collection. Courtesy Hall Art Foundation. © Katherine Bradford.

Some of the qualities that make Bradford's paintings so compelling are the same ones that make them difficult to write about. Accordingly, I asked my friend Anna Kunz, another great painter of emotions, colors, and surfaces, for her help. She said she thinks of Bradford as painting not the figures but the feelings between the figures; that her work is akin to poetry in its attempt to turn fleeting emotions into something concrete and thinkable. More than anything, I like Bradford's paintings because they are so unequivocally what they are: unpretentious and joyful, at times discomfiting, and at times just plain funny. They're earnestly optimistic about the social function of painting, but harbor no delusions about it either—philosophical, yet no less accessibly pleasurable than a clambake on the beach.

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## **Contributor**

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